WORKING LIFE

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People issues count when integrating e-business

DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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Several weeks after the holiday shopping season, horror stories continue about the difficulties people are having on-line. Problems returning stock, obtaining refunds or simply getting customer support suggest that companies involved in electronic commerce have a lot to learn.

This isn't surprising. Although many organizations are eager to cash in on the e-business craze, they often rush to put the technology in place and forget that it is people who have to make it work.

Consider this dismal statistic: U.S.-based Jupiter Communications recently reported that more than half of the top on-line commerce sites weren't able to answer e-mail within five days of a customer query. Obviously, a lot of firms haven't smoothly integrated their Web sites into traditional customer support channels.

How can a company be successful in the era of e-business if it can't handle the simplest task?

The business world is discovering that while handling e-commerce technology may be easy, the people issues aren't. It takes tremendous time and effort to deal with staff, distribution channels, trading partners, suppliers and everyone else with whom a company has a relationship when implementing an on-line strategy.

Changing day-to-day procedures of an organization — from the most straightforward tasks to the most complex of workflow systems — can be a massive challenge.

The difficulty was captured in my experience with an airline a few years ago. I had begun to buy all of my tickets on-line. At one point, I had to cancel a booking and presumed that all I had to do was revisit the airline's Web site, access my ticket details and choose the cancel button.

You'd think that this would trigger a chain of events that would result in a refund on my credit card statement.

Far from it. After two months of not seeing a credit, I called the airline. After investigating for a while the customer support person advised me that when cancelling a ticket, just visiting the Web site wasn't enough — I had to call the airline as well.

Nowhere on the Web site did it say this was necessary. How could I get a refund? The person on the phone didn't know, but gave me another number to call.

It then took seven more phone calls to figure out how to get my credit. At one point, I talked to someone in the accounting department who said that I shouldn't be buying tickets over the Internet at all, because it "made things too complicated." This from a representative of a company that was then running ads encouraging people to buy tickets on-line.

If an organization doesn't ensure that its entire staff is fully aware of the intricacies of its e-business initiative, and if it doesn't smoothly integrate its e-commerce effort into all of its business procedures, it might as well not bother at all.

To compound the problem, many e-commerce initiatives can have a negative impact on the very staff who must be in tune with what is happening. They may view the initiative as a threat to their livelihood and likely work against it success, rather than for it.

Consider the typical insurance company, which is looking to sell policies directly on-line. In doing so, it is likely to greatly upset those in its distribution channel (that is, its agents and brokers), who will view the insurer as competing directly with them.

The company must balance its efforts to implement a direct sales strategy with the need to alleviate the concerns within its existing channel — not an easy task.

Resistance to the change posed by e-business is likely the biggest problem that organizations face.

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